



Justification and Evangelicalism

LEADER'S GUIDE

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Introduction

We probably all have friends or colleagues who enthusiastically describe themselves as “born-again Christians.” Perhaps we have even heard such people talk about a specific time or experience in their lives when they chose to begin following Jesus or “made a decision for Christ.” We may admire the openness and boldness with which they share their faith in Christ, but at the same time have questions about certain aspects of what they believe. Or, maybe their testimony and Christian witness have led us to question our own faith or our salvation: Am I really a Christian if I haven’t made a “decision for Christ”? Have I been “born again”? Is simply believing in Jesus enough, without the sort of born-again “experience” that my evangelical friend describes? Is trusting in my Baptism (especially if it happened when I was an infant) the same as trusting in Jesus? Why do I have so much trouble talking openly and boldly about my faith in Jesus? Or, we may ask: How can I share what Lutherans believe about Baptism, faith and the saving work of Christ with these Christian friends who seem to believe differently? Hopefully, the following study will help address some of these questions.

(Slide 1) In this Bible study we look at the doctrine of justification and evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is a significant and influential part of Christianity in America. Some of you might have grown up in evangelical churches or circles, many of you have evangelical friends, and probably everybody has listened to evangelical radio stations, watched evangelical preachers on TV and read books by evangelical authors. In this Bible study we explore what Lutherans and evangelicals have in common and where they differ regarding justification.

What do we mean when we talk about evangelicalism or evangelicals?

(Slide 2) What are the characteristic features of evangelicalism? Are there different kinds of evangelicals? If so, what do they have in common?

Are we Lutheran evangelicals? Evangelical means “pertaining to the Gospel.” Lutherans are rightly referred to as evangelicals because we emphasize the Gospel in preaching

and as the foundation of the Church. Therefore, many congregations have the word “evangelical” in their name. However, the term evangelical is also used by others in different ways.

In this study we are referring to “evangelicalism” as a particular movement in American Protestantism. It defines “evangelical” in ways that differ from the historic Lutheran usage of the term. The way in which Lutherans refer to themselves as “evangelicals” can be compared and contrasted with two alternate definitions: How evangelicals see and describe themselves, and how others see evangelicalism. Evangelicals see and describe themselves as a “movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency.”¹ Evangelicalism is not a denomination or synod, but a movement in churches that emphasizes basic Christian teachings and zeal for missionary outreach.

Some church bodies are completely evangelical in this sense (Southern Baptists, for example); in other church bodies evangelicals are one faction among others (evangelical groups within the United Methodist Church, for example). Among the traditional beliefs that evangelicals hold are: the doctrine of the Trinity (shared by all Christians), the virgin birth, the full divinity and humanity of Christ, and Scripture “as the divinely inspired record of God’s revelation.” They emphasize the total sinfulness of man, and salvation by grace through faith on account of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. They also emphasize the importance of following Jesus by living a sanctified life, the necessity of personal witnessing (“heralding the Word of God”), and the expectation of a “visible, personal return of Jesus Christ.”²

(Slide 3) On the website of the National Association of Evangelicals the four points are used to summarize how evangelicals describe themselves:

“Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a ‘born-again’ experience and a life-long process of following Jesus”;

“Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts”;

“Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority”;

¹ R. V. Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter E. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1984), 379.

² Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” 379–80.

“Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity.”³

This video, based on these four points, may be used and discussed if desired: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlldBqQ6bM4>

(Slide 4) How do others see evangelicals?

Another helpful summary of evangelical identity identifies the following six distinct theological teachings:

- i. “Holy Scripture is the supreme authority ...
- ii. The main theme of Scripture is God’s saving work. God sent his Son, who bore the sins of the world on the cross and made redemption possible ...
- iii. Eternal salvation comes only through personal faith in Christ, which God gives. Yet since God leaves room for freedom of decision, the experience of becoming and being a Christian assumes great importance ...
- iv. For this reason, evangelism and mission tend to take precedence over social action ...
- v. Ethics is developed, not out of the situation, but out of God’s Law and ordinances.
- vi. Christ’s return is expected literally.”⁴

How do these definitions compare with what the class participants said about evangelicalism? What did the participants mention that goes beyond this definition?

(Slide 5) Erich Geldbach, in his article in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, names The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a part of the evangelical movement. What do you think about this?

What speaks in favor of it?

What speaks against it?

There are obviously commonalities: Lutherans and evangelicals emphasize such basic biblical doctrines as the Trinity, Christ’s two natures, the authority and inspiration of

³ www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/. The points are by historian David Bebbington. The National Association of Evangelicals takes up the theme up positively as a self-identification: “These distinctives and theological convictions define us – not political, social or cultural trends.” The order of the four distinctives varies in use.

⁴ Erich Geldbach, “Evangelical Movement”, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, E-1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001), 217.

Scripture, the total sinfulness and lost condition of humanity, that salvation comes through the death and resurrection of Christ and is received by faith without works, that evangelization and mission are important, and that the Law of God is an enduring guide for the Christian life. But there are also differences:

- Evangelicalism is a movement in many denominations vs. Lutheranism as a distinct church or denomination.

People of different denominations can be evangelicals, because only certain doctrines define evangelicalism. As a result, other Christian teachings may be minimized and differences on many questions are seen as not divisive of the basic unity of evangelicalism. Some examples are infant Baptism or adult Baptism; the presence and importance of so-called “gifts of the Spirit” such as speaking in tongues, and, as we will see, also questions pertaining to justification. These questions and others are often thought to be of relatively minor importance. This means there is a difference in the view of the church:

- Unity in doctrine vs. diversity in matters like infant/adult Baptism.

Lutherans emphasize that the pure proclamation of the Gospel and proper administration of the Sacraments — nothing less and nothing more — is necessary for the true unity of the Church.⁵ From a Lutheran perspective, evangelicalism’s character as a “movement” results in the fact that it *is not* a church since it does not emphasize the full counsel of God in these crucial areas as the Church does.

- Sacraments as God’s Means of Grace vs. symbols

We see in the description of the basic tenets of evangelicalism that the Sacraments do not play an essential role. In evangelicalism, the Sacraments are mostly seen as ordinances and symbolic rites, but not as actual ways that God comes to us (Means of Grace). This is a basic difference between Lutherans and evangelicals, and by no means an unimportant one. The question is: What did our Lord teach about Baptism and the Lord’s Supper and how does He want His Church to teach and use them? Evangelicalism has its roots in the Reformed churches and their understanding of the Sacraments. Thus, the Lutheran objections against the Reformed understanding of the Sacraments apply also to the evangelical understanding of the Sacraments.

⁵ AC VII, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.

2. The Common Ground (Slide 6)

As we have seen there is common ground between Lutherans and evangelicals in some respects. When we are talking about justification, this common ground consists in:

- The centrality of Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection from the dead as the foundation of man’s justification
- Justification is by faith, not by works

We can be thankful that these important truths are taught in evangelical congregations and churches. The result is that the Gospel is proclaimed and people may come to faith as they hear the Good News that Christ died and rose again for the sins of the world. As C.F.W. Walther reminds us, God gathers believers also in “heterodox churches” “if only God’s Word and the Sacraments are not denied entirely.” However, Walther then also reminds us that this fact does not mean that doctrinal differences can be ignored for the true Gospel must be guarded because salvation depends on it.⁶

3. The Differences Between Evangelicals and Lutherans Concerning Justification

(Slide 7)

Despite the points of agreement on justification, there are also differences between Lutherans and evangelicals. To take these differences seriously is not mean-spirited, focused on finding fault, or demonstrating a judgmental attitude towards other Christians. Rather, the purpose is twofold: first, to sharpen our own understanding of the truth of justification and be able to discern what is true and what is false so that we do not fall into error; second, so that we are able to explain to our evangelical relatives and friends what we believe and why we believe it.

- Making a decision for Jesus — Justification and Baptism
You may have heard people — perhaps family and friends — speak about the day they asked Jesus to come into their lives. A popular older evangelical hymn is titled, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” The late famed evangelist, Billy Graham, followed the pattern of ending his sermons by inviting people to come forward to “make a decision for Christ.”

⁶ C.F.W. Walther, *The Church and The Office of the Ministry*, trans. J.T. Mueller, ed., rev., and annotated Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 91.

- Conversionism

The National Association of Evangelicals defines “Conversionism” as “the belief that lives need to be transformed through a ‘born-again’ experience and a life-long process of following Jesus.”

This is one part of the NAE’s definition of evangelicalism and is a very common belief among evangelicals: One has to be “born-again” by means of a decision for Christ in order to truly call oneself a “born-again Christian.” Where does this “born-again” language come from?

- Read John 3:3–5.

To what is Jesus referring here? Jesus is referring to being born-again (or being “born from above”) through water and the Spirit. Thus, He is referring to Baptism.⁷ When Lutherans talk about being born again, they are also thinking of Titus 3:5. This verse is quoted in the Small Catechism, the third question on Baptism:

“How can water do such great things? — Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God’s word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says in Titus, chapter three: ‘He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying’ (TITUS 3:5-8).”⁸

Notice that Titus 3 speaks about Baptism (not a decision we make) as “the washing of rebirth.” Lutherans, too, talk about regeneration, but they tie it closely to Baptism, and to the life-giving Word and work of God (1 PETER 1:23) — not to a specific decision we make or an emotional personal experience.

(Slide 8) “Making a Decision” and Baptism

What do you think about the emphasis on a born-again experience? Do you think that such an experience is necessary for every Christian? How does such an experience relate to Baptism?

⁷ For a detailed exposition of the relationship between Jesus’ words to Nicodemus and Baptism, see William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1 Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 421–24.

⁸ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 24.

For Evangelicals, the Christian life begins with a “born-again experience” that we make for ourselves. Lutherans who are baptized as babies recognize that their Christian life begins with their Baptism. In Baptism God adopted you as His child, gave you Christ’s righteousness and gave you His Holy Spirit. Or, as the Small Catechism puts it:

“What benefit does Baptism give? — It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”⁹

These gifts, as all gifts of God, are received in faith. Without faith, Baptism does not benefit us. But even small children can receive these gifts in faith. As an adult, I do not need some other sort of a “decision for Jesus” or “conversion experience.” Rather, I trust in the promise that God has made in my Baptism and live a life of daily repentance (*Small Catechism*, fourth question on Baptism). For those who are adult converts and are baptized as adults, the foundation of their life as Christians is also not a one-time experience, but consists in receiving the Word of the Gospel in faith and trusting in this Gospel.

There is another issue concerning the emphasis on experience. How do I know that I am a Christian? If the born-again experience is central, then it is not farfetched to say: “I know I am a Christian because of my experience” or “because I made a decision for Jesus.”

How would you answer the question, “How do you know you are a Christian?” Don’t look inward to what you have decided or done. You are a Christian because God has said that you are His child through your Baptism — that is where your faith looks. Faith is not faith in an experience; faith looks to God’s gracious promise.

The Christian life starts with God’s promise given to me and consists in believing this promise, not in a special experience.

4. Conversionism and Free Will (Slide 9)

As we have seen, the emphasis on conversion and a born-again experience tends to go hand in hand with an emphasis on *making a decision* for Jesus. Let’s look more closely at the assumptions and ideas that such an emphasis includes. What do you think of the following ideas?

⁹ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 23

“Making a decision for Jesus”? (Sometimes this is called decision theology.)

The sinner’s prayer according to Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ):

”Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.”¹⁰

What do you think of this prayer?

Read Revelation 3:20.

Who can open the door to Jesus? (We will take up this question a little later).

Faith and confession go together, but does that mean that a decision makes me a Christian?

No! There is no Christian who does not confess his sins and his faith in Christ (excluding Christians who cannot communicate because of age or debilitating illness). The insistence by evangelicals on “making a decision for Jesus” suggests and often implies that becoming a Christian means choosing between two options, and that (therefore) being a Christian is a matter of choice. That fits our overall view of life, which is full of choices that we have to make, but this picture is seriously wrong when it comes to justification and conversion.

(Slide 10) What does the fact that we are “by nature sinful and unclean” mean for our ability to choose?

It means that we *cannot* choose to believe in Christ by our own reason or strength. As we confess, we are “by nature sinful and unclean,” or as Scripture says, we are “dead in trespasses” (EPH. 2:1).

Read Ephesians 2:1–5.

How does Paul talk about the way the Ephesians became Christians? Does he mention their decision or say that they asked Jesus to enter into their lives?

What does the description of non-Christians as dead say about their ability to make any steps toward God? What kind of death is meant here? It means spiritual death, not physical death.

¹⁰ <https://crustore.org/fourlawseng.htm>

What does it mean to be spiritually dead? It means that man has no spiritual life, no faith towards God, that he cannot do God’s will and that he has no power to change that situation.

Read again Revelation 3:20.

Can a dead person open the door? What has to happen before I can open the door and let Jesus in? A dead person cannot do anything, certainly not get up and open the door. Rather, it is the person who is revived and made alive — that is, the believer — who opens the door to Christ. When the Holy Spirit creates faith in us, He also creates the new life and the will to be with Jesus. This is how we receive Christ. We do so *as Christians* and because of God’s life-giving Word, not *before* we become Christians. This is similar to the command to believe:

“The words of Christ ‘Repent, and believe in the Gospel’ (MARK 1:15) do not prove that people are able to do this by their own powers. Lazarus could not raise himself from the dead. Christ commanded Lazarus to come out of the grave (JOHN 11:43–44). In the same way unconverted people who are dead in sins cannot raise themselves spiritually. They are raised and converted by the power of God through the Word (Ps. 19:7) Jesus says, ‘No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him’ (JOHN 6:44).”¹¹

(Slide 11) Among evangelicals, there is often the idea that a person who is not a Christian can exercise his or her will to become a Christian, that we have the freedom to choose to be Christian. From this perspective, being a Christian (or getting right with God) is the sum of God’s grace and your decision:

God’s grace + our decision = Becoming a Christian = Justification. (Wrong!)

But as we saw in Ephesians, becoming a Christian and being justified in God’s sight is all God’s doing.

God’s grace in the Gospel (Word and Sacrament) + God’s gift of faith = Becoming a Christian (Right!)

God makes the spiritually dead alive. If you are dead, you cannot do anything to become alive. The view that man has a free will is often called “Arminianism,” after Jacob Arminius, a Reformed theologian who lived around 1600.

The view that man cooperates in his salvation is called “synergism” (cooperationism). Both teachings corrupt the true

¹¹ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 3rd rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 180.

teaching of justification, because in such a view justification is no longer the work of God *alone*.

There are also evangelicals who deny free will and thus teach more like the classical Reformed churches. But it is fair to say that the most popular form of evangelicalism teaches some form of free will.

Lutheranism teaches that we are by nature dead in sin and that God revives us. Therefore, God alone saves us.

5. Conclusion

Evangelicalism is a very prominent strand of Christianity in America. We can be glad that evangelical churches preach Christ as Savior and justification by faith is emphasized. A problem with evangelicalism is that Christ is often not preached 100% as Savior. Instead, it is taught that man has to do his part to be saved. There is also a problem with evangelicalism when it does not follow Christ's institution of Baptism as the washing of regeneration, in which we receive Christ's righteousness and are justified freely as His gracious gift. Finally, there is a problem with evangelicalism when it fosters a faith that relies on an inner experience instead of the Gospel — telling people that they have to make a decision for Jesus, or have a particular experience, or say the right prayer before they can be saved.

